Europe's U.S. Mil

EUROPE'S only U.S. military detention facility — the U.S. Army Confinement Facility, Europe, in Mannheim, Germany — houses some 80 prisoners in its two stories at any time. Most of them are soldiers, but a few are sailors or airmen.

"Offenders who come here are typically single, white males, about 24 years old," said CPT Ricky Martinez, a social worker in the prison's Correctional Treatment Branch.

"About 45 percent of them have received Article 15s before being sent here, and 45 percent have admitted that a substance-abuse problem contributed to their behavior," Martinez said.

"They serve sentences for crimes that include drug possession, use and distribution; arson, larceny; child or spouse abuse; rape; even murder," he added.

"If a soldier receives a life sentence in Europe following a court martial, he comes here before being sent to a maximum-security prison in the United States," said CPT William Torrey, the facility's executive officer.

"If prisoners come in here with sentences of more than one year, we start procedures to get them transferred to the United States right away," Torrey said. "If they require maximum-level security, we try to get them out of here within two weeks."

Two convicted child molesters, who both received 18-year prison terms, were among a recent group of maximum-security prisoners. They were transported out within two weeks, Torrey said.

Quarterly, groups of prisoners are flown via C-5 transport plane to the United States, where they serve their sentences at the U.S. Army Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., or one of three regional U.S. Army correctional facilities, Torrey said.

"First they have to be cleared through the U.S. Army, Europe, Judge Advocate General's office, to ensure there are

The U.S. Army Confinement Facility, Europe, in Mannheim, Germany, has five watchtowers, double fences, concertina wire and perimeter sensors, and can house up to maximum-security-level prisoners.

itary Prison

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

no additional pending actions against the prisoner. German authorities must also approve the transfer of inmates, Torrey said. “The Germans have first dibs on prosecuting soldiers who break the law in Germany, even if a soldier is charged with assaulting another soldier on a U.S. military installation in Germany.

“The number-one offense of prisoners here is use and distribution of drugs,” said Torrey. “Most popular now is ‘Ecstasy,’ followed by marijuana, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and sometimes heroine and cocaine.”

Soldiers of the 9th Military Police Detachment, part of the Mannheim-based 95th MP Battalion, make up the prison’s guard force, its headquarters and social-work section. They also man the prison’s “industry” shops, Torrey said, to teach inmates carpentry and other skills. A full-time Army chaplain is on hand, too, to provide spiritual support.

SFC William Powell is chief of the Prisoner Services Branch at the confinement facility. As such, he’s responsible for in-processing prisoners, which includes taking fingerprints and issuing badges. Sometimes, based on the type of crime an inmate has committed, DNA samples must be taken and sent to the appropriate laboratory.

Powell is also responsible for victim and witness notifications, sex-offender registration and ensuring prisoners have access to their attorneys. And to ease the harsh burden that befalls families when Army paychecks no longer arrive to cover bills, Powell administers the Prisoner Welfare Fund that provides them temporary monetary relief.

“Rarely do the soldiers we get return to active duty,” Torrey said. They may leave the prison to go back to their units, but, typically, only as a formality — to receive a bad conduct or dishonorable discharge after serving their prison time.

“During a six-month stay here for

A 9th Military Police Detachment soldier, one of some 100 who rotate guard duty at the facility, returns a prisoner to his cell.

A prison guard unlocks one of the gates, allowing other guards access to another section of the facility.

"The number-one offense of prisoners here is use and distribution of drugs. Most popular now is 'Ecstasy,' followed by marijuana, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and sometimes heroine and cocaine."

an absent-without-leave offense, for example, a soldier's commander may have filed a Chapter 14 action, or misconduct report, to discharge him," Torrey said.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any way of tracking repeat offenders," Torrey added. "That's because to be sent to the confinement facility a soldier has to be court-martialed." And once he has done something that results in that level of punishment, the Army won't give him the chance to do it again, Torrey said.

That's not to say the Army doesn't give soldiers who make a mistake a second chance. "A soldier might very well have been given a second chance by his commander, who elected not to court-martial him after he committed a first offense," Torrey said.

Powell, who's worked in Army confinement facilities for 18 years, said: "Often the soldiers who end up in confinement have been given several chances at the unit level. Commanders often try to retrain them, get them into counseling or give them Article 15s, as opposed to courts-martial."

Because the confinement facility is a short-term facility, "the programs we can provide prisoners are limited," said Torrey. "It's the difference between a confinement facility and a correctional facility." Anger-management is one of the courses that are offered.

As chief of social-work services, Martinez works with four enlisted soldiers and a graduate student from the University of Maryland, who's doing his practicum at the prison. Along with mental-health services specialists, they provide limited rehabilitative services, he said.

"About one-third of the prisoners volunteer to participate in classes," Martinez said. A life-skills class helps inmates identify their own personality traits and recognize how they differ from others'. How to enhance communication skills, deal with stress, and prepare for a job interview are among other topics of instruction.

The prisoners' day begins at 0530. After the wake-up call, they clean their cells, which contain little more than a cot with sheets, blanket and pillow, and a sink and toilet. After breakfast, they go to work in the prison's dining facility, pulling "KP" or working as cooks' assistants, Torrey said. They also tidy up offices, work in the supply section, paint and wood shops (where they make plaques for units throughout Europe), and the prison laundry.

Life here is without doubt regimented and restrictive, Torrey said. It's a real eye-opener to what loss of freedom feels like, he said.

Massive barred doors divide portions of long corridors, separating cell blocks that house various categories of inmates — male and female; medium- and maximum-security; and pre- and post-trial — those who haven't been convicted yet and are awaiting trial, versus those who have been convicted.

Tops and bottoms of staircases dead end at more barred doors that can only be opened by MPs carrying heavy key rings.

Inmates who commit an infraction at the prison can be sentenced by a prison board to 30 days in "disciplinary segregation," also known as "Delta

The heavy brown steel doors that separate sections of the prison can be opened only by a select group of guards holding the keys.

At the end of the day, MPs who work at the facility have an option prisoners would cherish — they get to leave.

"You have to come across to the inmates as an authority, without coming across as though you're here to make their lives miserable."

Block," Martinez said.

In a central control room, guards can view every aspect of the prison, inside and out, from four monitors fed by cameras located throughout the facility, and on each of the outside towers.

Throughout the facility, inmates complete such assigned chores as waxing and polishing floors. The spit-shined linoleum throughout the facility attests to the staff's level of expectation and discipline, as do the rows of neatly placed shoes in the cell blocks, the uniformly made beds, and the spotless sinks and toilets.

SPC David Stroh, an MP who's worked at the facility for almost two years, said, "You have to come across to the inmates as an authority, without coming across as though you're here to make their lives miserable.

"While we're directed not to get involved with them personally, we can show concern when they're especially bothered by something," Stroh said. "We can ask them what's wrong and direct them to the proper source for support or intervention."

From an aisle of pipes outside "Delta Block," where prisoners are segregated for disciplinary or health reasons, an MP of the 9th MP Det. flushes an inmate's toilet.

To alleviate some of the stress posed by being imprisoned, time for recreation is provided one hour a day, at which time inmates may work out in the gym or play board games, Powell said. When the weather permits, they may go outside. During additional free time, they're allowed to visit the prison library or chapel.

The amount of mail inmates may receive is unlimited, Powell said, and music and special programming, via the Armed Forces Network-Europe, is piped into their cell blocks after duty hours.

Prisoner privileges also include visitors on weekends, but only after prison counselors have approved the visit and Army officials have ascertained that the visitor isn't linked to the respective inmate's crime, Powell said.

There are no conjugal visits for married prisoners. Their opportunities for physical closeness are limited to hand-holding and brief kisses, Powell said.

Most prisoners accept their circumstances, he said. The last time an inmate tried to escape was in December 1999, Torrey added.

"It was a poor effort, to say the least. The guy was taking out the trash and decided to make a run for it, forgetting the circular razor wire on the first of two fences. It sliced his hands up pretty bad," Torrey said.

Besides his physical injury, the soldier, who had eight months of his sentence remaining, received an additional sentence for his escape attempt.

Other deterrents to escape include fence sensors that set off alarms when touched and five manned watchtowers that surround the facility.

"The biggest thing about confinement," said Powell, "is loss of freedom and liberty. Having to go to prison is punishment alone." The easiest way to never have to experience it is to stay out of trouble, he said. □